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Organizations, Options, and Objectives in Foreign Policy

Allison and Zelikow's account of the Cuban missile crisis draws on several strands of organization theory to make an argument about the importance of bureaucracies and organizational structures in foreign policy decision-making. The authors claim that simple rational-actor explanations of the crisis are insufficient – by ignoring crucial intra-state processes such theories miss important variables that influence policy outcomes. In particular the “Model II” organizational approach influences the options presented to policymakers and the objectives that organizations pursue independent of policymaker oversight. Organizational outputs restrict the choices available to policymakers, and organizations create policy according to imperatives that may not align with policymaker intentions. Agenda-setting and policy autonomy will be the key analytic lenses through which I will examine the Soviet placement of missiles, American response, and Soviet missile withdrawal.

Why did the Soviets place strategic offensive missiles in Cuba? This question is among the most puzzling, since it is apparent that the intended consequences of missile placement were entirely undercut by the manner in which they were placed. Allison and Zelikow seem to basically accept Krushchev's claim that in some manner the missile placement was intended to create further stability in superpower relations (209). Yet the implementation of this plan “greatly increased the chance that nuclear weapons might be used.” The implementation created two major problems – first, lack of secrecy created a tempting window of opportunity for the US to strike and, second, the information about tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba that might have deterred a US assault was kept secret. Essentially, the information conducive to instability was

revealed to the US, while the information conducive to stability was not. The reason for this crucial anomaly can be found in organizational autonomy. Soviet military organizations acted according to set doctrines and priorities that had little or nothing to do with the ultimate objectives of state leaders.

In the case of Cuba, this involved a lack of camouflage, an easy-to-spot placement pattern, a lack of hardening but presence of reload missiles, insufficient air defenses, and the secrecy of the tactical nuclear deployment (210-217). All of these except the air defenses were the result of Soviet military doctrine – the standard operating procedures that guided military action. Soviet forces had never before been faced with the need to camouflage or change missile deployment patterns, the SOP in Europe was for a second-strike capability against Western Europe, and under normal circumstances military leaders would be loath to signal capabilities. In the case of air defense, insufficient guidance from above led to a risk-averse organizational posture. When the Soviet military did not receive guidance from policymakers on specific issues (and sometimes even when it did), it acted according to organizational routines and standard procedures that produced outcomes highly anomalous in the context of the Soviets' stated aims. Organizational autonomy is the key to understanding this disparity.

The American response to the discovery of missiles in Cuba was also shaped heavily by organizational dynamics. This occurred in a variety of ways (for instance, the timing of discovery and details of the quarantine line), but given space constraints I will focus in particular on the response options presented to the President and his most senior advisers. The intelligence and military agencies of the US government held the power to set the agenda – they were the experts with access to vast resources and personnel able to assess possible options. The military's assumptions and biases regarding the feasibility and desirability of different air strike

and invasion options created a particular set of possible options for policy-makers to choose among. The way the Air Force in particular presented options played a key role in influencing the ultimate outcome of the crisis – Allison and Zelikow make it clear that policymakers would have looked very favorably upon a “surgical strike” option (229). As they say, “organizations defined what the president believed U.S. military equipment and personnel were capable of doing in the Cuban missile crisis” (225).

If the organizational norms and processes had been aligned in a different way (perhaps more risk - and casualty-acceptant, or using a different model) it’s quite possible such a strike would have been a serious option and carried out. The consequences of such an action, needless to say, would have been quite significant. This is not to say that organizational dynamics, at least according to Allison and Zelikow, are the primary reason why the quarantine was chosen, but the evidence indicates that different organizational definitions of military capabilities, doctrine, and combat outcomes (for instance, doctrinally-driven concern over the nuclear capability of Mig-21s seems to have been a major reason Valiant I was regarded by the Air Force as unacceptable; likewise with SAMs and the failings of Valiant II; p. 228) would have dramatically increased the likelihood of a military strike on Cuba. The role of government organizations as agenda-setters able to restrict the set of options available to policymakers is a crucial organizational dynamic influencing outcomes.

Finally, we move to the third important question Allison and Zelikow pose - why did the USSR remove the missiles? However, this question is barely addressed by the organizational approach. The “withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba” section of Chapter 4 is exclusively about American organizational dynamics, as US politicians tried to manage the quarantine and not allow escalation. While very interesting (and at times alarming), this approach does not

actually tell us anything substantial about Soviet decision-making and organizations. Allison and Zelikow claim that the interaction leading up to the Soviet decision “pitted government leaders against organizations whose output they sought to control” (237).

But the rest of the chapter is almost exclusively about how the US operated. There is no evidence provided that the Soviet response was in any way decisively influenced by organizational doctrines or standard operating procedures. The only discussion of the Soviet side of the decision is Krushchev’s mistake in using the radio to propose removal of missiles from Turkey. And this “anomaly” has nothing to do with organizations (240). Organizational influence on the Soviet decision to stand down is absent in Essence of Decision’s account. This makes it extremely difficult for us to legitimately assess the significance of Soviet organizational autonomy or agenda-setting in the withdrawal decision.

Allison and Zelikow’s inability to show any impact of organizations on the withdrawal of missiles is one of the several major problems in their application of Model II to the crisis. The organizational approach also has little to say about why the Soviets originally decided to place the missiles in Cuba, specifically why the quarantine was chosen (as opposed to why air strikes were not chosen), and under what circumstances policymakers can successfully intervene in organizational routines. This is not to say that the organizational approach should be ignored, but instead that Allison and Zelikow’s application of it to the missile crisis needs a more clear and specific description of the aspects of the crisis where organizations mattered, where they didn’t, and in each case why. As it stands, the research design is un-systematic and seemingly ad hoc, as certain issues are focused on without explanation of why, while others that seem just as important are totally ignored.

Part of this problem arises from the theoretical approach laid out in Chapter 3, where a laundry list of propositions are outlined but there is little discussion of how organizational dynamics might interact with other causes and constraints (i.e. rational actor or bureaucratic politics or psychological). A more tightly specified theory of organizational influence would tell us when to look for organizational influences and when to not expect their presence. Such an approach would have reduced the overselling of the organizational approach's explanatory power by Allison and Zelikow, particularly regarding the question of Soviet withdrawal.